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## Uproar Over the Backfire

After all the legitimate obstacles had been overcome, a bogus issue almost obstructed the SALT II agreement and came close to spoiling President Carter's first meeting with Soviet leader Brezhnev.

On the eve of the historic Vienna summit meeting, Sen. Henry Jackson (D-Wash.), the Senate's leading SALT critic, publicly accused the president of appeasing the Soviets on arms limitation. Jackson went so far as to compare Carter to Neville Chamberlain, the umbrella-toting British prime minister whose appeasement of Adolf Hitler at Munich in 1938 has become the historical cliché for weakness in dealing with dictatorships.

The president was so abashed by this odious comparison that when he arrived in Vienna in a light drizzle, he actually spurned the offer of a brolly—Chamberlain's symbol of dishonor 41 years ago. "I'd rather drown than carry an umbrella," Carter hissed to an aide.

The president's determination not to appear like Chamberlain nearly aborted the negotiations. The sticking point came over the Backfire Bomber, the name the Western allies have given to the Soviets' TU-22M bomber, which was first deployed in 1974 after five years of testing.

Carter asked the Soviets to confirm how many of the bombers they were producing each year, but Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko cut him off brusquely. "No answer is required to that question," he growled.

The treaty presented for signing, it was true, contained no mention of the Backfire Bomber, but the Soviets had agreed to supply a separate statement pledging to limit production of the plane. So the next day Carter coldly demanded the promised statement. That led to a tense confrontation between Secretary of State Vance and the surly Gromyko.

At last Brezhnev, with an air of sweet reasonableness, spoke out: "Thirty, it's 30 a year. There! Another Soviet concession." The summit continued.

Yet that was not to be the end of the Backfire Bomber controversy. SALT critics now profess to be horrified that the plane was not included in the treaty. But we have concluded from our own examination of top-secret papers that this is a spurious issue. Not only is the Backfire Bomber covered in a separate agreement, but it is hope-

lessly inferior to our own FB111A, which is not limited by any agreement.

In other words, the Backfire Bomber is simply not worth arguing about. It is strictly a red herring intended to confuse the public. And yet, in the mysterious ways of Washington, this bomber, irrelevant though it is, has become a serious issue with a life of its own. It must now be dealt with as if it were a matter of some importance.

There was confusion at first over the range of the Backfire Bomber. A top CIA source told our associate Dale Van Atta that the United States obtained smuggled photographs of the plane. An analysis of the photographs provided many technical facts about the planes, except its range.

That left the crucial question unanswered. Was this a new strategic weapon? In other words, could it fly, unrefueled, all the way to the United States, unleash its bombs and land in a third country, such as Cuba?

The Defense Intelligence Agency ventured a hesitant "yes." Its first calculations suggested that the Backfire Bomber had a range of 6,200 miles at high altitude. The SALT negotiators, therefore, began demanding that it be included in the count of strategic weapons.

That seems to have mystified the Russians. A top-secret CIA report discloses that Vadim Chulitsky, the chief Soviet SALT delegate, complained to friends that the Backfire Bomber issue was "artificially created to block negotiations."

The CIA has now concluded that the bomber poses no great threat to the United States. Though with long-range modifications it could reach targets in this country, it would take up to 10 hours to get here—far too long to be of any significance in a push-button war. It is essentially a medium-range bomber, intended for missions other than an intercontinental "first strike" against the United States.

In contrast to our comparable FB111As, which are in a state of constant alert in the Northeastern United States, the Soviets keep their Backfire Bomber in limbo as an adjunct of their conventional forces. They are nowhere near striking distance of this country; their crews are not on alert; and they are not trained for strategic missions.

The FB111As, of course, aren't covered by any treaty limitation. But according

to the top-secret CIA report, the weary Chulitsky "to bring the current [SALT] negotiations to a conclusion" accepted a separate agreement limiting the controversial Backfire Bomber.

Yet SALT critics purport to be incensed at its exclusion from the arms-limitation treaty. The Pentagon, for its part, has shown itself willing to use the phony Backfire Bomber issue as a budgetary bargaining chip. In closed Senate testimony last January, Gen. Richard H. Ellis, the Strategic Air Command chief, asked for funds to improve the already updated versions of the FB111As. This program, he said, "would effectively offset the omission of the Backfire from SALT II."

In addition to the FB111As, the United States has nearly 3,000 other aircraft with nuclear capability within striking distance of the Soviet Union from aircraft carriers on land bases.

Yet the uproar over the Backfire Bomber continues and will keep raising clouds of exhaust. The thing to remember, when you get right down to it, is that a backfire is nothing but hot air.

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